

# Obituary of James Woodburn 1934-2022

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James Woodburn's last research visit to Hadza country was in 2017. Few anthropologists have maintained active research with the same group for 59 years. In 1958, as a young Cambridge anthropologist, James arrived in Hadza country with no idea where the people were nor what language they spoke. Meeting two Italian brothers seeking to earn enough money by hunting elephants for passage to America, James soon met the Hadza when they saw the vultures flying over one of the elephant carcasses and came to feast.

Unable to effectively communicate during those first few months, James lived in fear that the Hadza would abandon him during the night. Indeed, he later recounted that one of the men from that original camp told him decades later that they had planned to abandon him, but never got round to it.

Having been forced to do military service and learn Russian, James was also an accomplished linguist. He enthusiastically learned Swahili to facilitate his first contacts with the Hadza. For the rest of his life James loved to break into Swahili whenever he happened upon someone who looked East African. Establishing a record of the Hadza language was James' major preoccupation following retirement and the objective of his most recent field trips. His persistence and enthusiasm inspired others, including many Hadza, to value and study this language isolate. Indeed, the wonderfully vivid collaborative ethnography that Daudi Peterson<sup>1</sup> coordinated is testament to James' unfailing enthusiasm to record their lives and ways, and to inspire others including the Hadza, to do so, too.

James Woodburn's services to Anthropology and hunter-gatherer studies have been enormous over the past six decades. From the very particular study of a small group of hunter-gatherers (presently about 1300 people), James made clear their relevance to some of the biggest questions facing humanity, historically and today: the dynamics of equality and inequality, the gendered division of labour, on ethnographic analogy in human evolution, on the relationship between death practices, ritual and power among the living, on hunter-gatherer self-determination and autonomy, on demand sharing, discrimination and on the political status of hunter-gatherers across the world.

In particular James' work on the dynamics of egalitarianism has been hugely influential: He remains best-known in the wider academic community for his distinction between immediate-return and delayed-return systems, sometimes at the expense of his many other theoretical contributions. James' intention in making the immediate/delayed return distinction was to avoid oversimplifying categories such as "hunter-gatherers" by emphasising the importance of the internal

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<sup>1</sup> Daudi Peterson with Richard Baalow and Jon Cox. 2013. *Hadzabe. By the light of a million fires*. Mkuki: Dar es Salaam.

dynamics and political values of groups even when appearing to share the same livelihood.

The distinction is based on the observation that subsistence strategies are embedded in dynamics that can create opportunities to establish dependencies with political consequences. Subsistence activities characterized by a significant time lag between work and the enjoyment of the yield from this labour opens up opportunities for the emergence of hierarchy and inequality between people. Ensuring that those who have contributed are recompensed for their labour stimulates the generation of notions of property and entitlement that establish lasting obligations that can be converted into more permanent forms of dependency, domination and authority.

Importantly, this is a systems theory that is not limited to particular technologies or subsistence methods. James considered the social systems of many indigenous Australians to be delayed-return because their marriage systems and translocal religious connections enabled individuals, in this case elder men, to accumulate power through polygamous marriage and by excluding younger men for extensive phases of their lives from crucial secret-sacred knowledge that would allow them to marry. Despite the wide applicability of these foundational theoretical ideas James was hesitant to formalize them into a closed theory. This was above all due to his huge respect for the details of empirical evidence which he readily accepted as being forceful enough to create much more complicated realities, more variability, and more room for human ingenuity to influence the course of things, than any formal theory would allow for.

For almost five decades, James taught at the London School of Economics, touching countless students with his passionate and enlightening explorations of the comparative ethnography of hunter-gatherers. Perhaps, in line with the emphasis on oral culture so evident among hunter-gatherers themselves, there was so much more to be learnt from attending his courses and seminars than just from reading his publications. James was a devoted academic supervisor who cared enormously for his students. He regularly went to car-boot sales for students, in particular with those from Africa when they needed things for their stay in the UK, or when leaving for field research or for home. To many of these students he became a life-long friend.

Particularly for his overseas students James epitomized the best of Britain in his interest in the individual person and his openness to the world. As an eccentric bicycle-enthusiast and dedicated bicycle-commuter, James not only owned a wide-array of second-hand foldable bikes and spare parts, but long before city councils realized how important it is to enhance everyday cycling, James was a prominent and influential member of the Cambridge Cycling Campaign which worked to improve cycling infrastructure in Cambridge.

In visits to the UN Working Group for Indigenous People and in contact with relevant activist networks, he regularly went beyond academic obligations to offer expert witness in court cases affecting hunter-gatherers, or by accompanying Hadza representatives to UN and other meetings. He often enabled these visits at a

time when indigenous representatives were not welcome in international settings and when the logistics of obtaining passports and travel opportunities were difficult. James was driven by the importance of reminding others of the significance of equality whenever possible, and of the need to reduce injustice and inappropriate group privileges. He was keen to collect good ideas, to hear arguments, to see detailed evidence and to jointly discuss positions and possibilities. He did this in a very unpretentious, confident and humorous way that will be missed by his family, colleagues, students and everyone who knew him.

James married Lisa in 1961 and is survived by her and their four daughters, Rebecca, Naomi, Francesca and Emma, and seven grandchildren.

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